

## The type species of *Mastacembelus* and the second edition of Russell's "Natural History of Aleppo"

By ALWYNE C. WHEELER

Department of Zoology, British Museum (Natural History)

(Received September, 1955)

DURING THE PERIOD (1742?–1753) that Alexander Russell was acting as "Physician to the British Factory" at Aleppo, he collected and made notes on the natural history of the area, which, on his return to England, were embodied in his "Natural History of Aleppo" . . . London, 1756 (dated MDCCCLVI in error). The chapter concerned with fishes mentions many from the River Coic (= Kowick) and the Orontes, and gives detailed descriptions of four species which Russell thought to be undescribed. One of these was a species of *Mastacembelus*, called by the natives "simak il inglese", which, he wrote (p. 76), "has never been suspected of being any ways different from the common eel; and yet, upon examination, it will be found of quite another genus". An illustration of the fish (Plate 12, figure 2) accompanied a short description of it.

In 1762 an edition of Russell's book was published in Holland, the translation being the work of Laurens Theodore Gronovius, to whom Russell had sent a collection of fishes from Aleppo. A year later, when Gronovius published his "Zoophylacium" it contained detailed descriptions of the *Mastacembelus* and of the three other species described by Russell. It is evident that the description of the *Mastacembelus* had been drawn up from a specimen and not just copied from Russell, for the number of dorsal spines was given by Gronovius, whereas Russell's statement is, "all along the ridge of the back, small prickles are placed at little distances, resembling the teeth of a saw." Also Gronovius apparently overlooked the produced snout of this fish and his figure shows it rounded as in an eel; this suggests that this specimen was, like most of his collection, a skin, and that it had shrunk on drying and so masked this striking feature. Although much of the Gronovius collection of fishes is preserved in the British Museum none of the specimens sent by Russell is now included; as this is the only part of the Gronovius collection known, Russell's specimens must be presumed to be no longer in existence.

As neither Russell nor Gronovius had proposed a binomen for the species of *Mastacembelus*, it remained for a later author to bestow one, and in due course Walbaum (1792) proposed the doubtfully binominal name *Ophidium Simack*. Later, Schneider (1801) proposed the name *Rhynchobdella halepensis* which has subsequently been in general use. Both authors based their names solely on the description by Gronovius in the "Zoophylacium".

Russell had, however, sent specimens to the British Museum and in the second edition of the "Natural History of Aleppo" published in 1794, his brother Patrick, who edited and revised it, wrote (vol. 2, p. 209), "My brother having deposited two specimens of this fish in the British Museum, Sir Joseph Banks and Dr. Solander after examining them and another specimen in my own possession, determined it to be an ophidium under the following description. *Ophidium Mastacembelus*. Maxillis imberbibus, superiore longiore acuminata: Cauda rotundata . . . etc. This name has been accepted by Shaw (1803) and by Sherborn (1902), (who attributed the name to Banks & Solander

in P. Russell), but it has apparently escaped the notice of other authors; as it is a valid binominal name and was published earlier than *Mastacembelus halepensis* (Schneider) it should replace that name. The two specimens mentioned by Patrick Russell are still in the British Museum, together with a third, which may possibly be the one referred to as being in his own collection. They were listed by Günther (1861) under the name of *Mastacembelus aleppensis*.

The suggestion to resurrect one of the names provided by Solander, and accepted and published by P. Russell, is not without precedent. Another of Russell's specimens was named by Solander *Silurus pelusius* and the type specimen is still in the British Museum. Günther (1864) listed it under *Macrones aleppensis* (Cuvier 1839), but at the time failed to notice Solander's name. In the addenda of the same volume (p. 431), however, he rectified the omission, and wrote, "On referring to the second edition of Russell's Natural History of Aleppo . . . I find that this fish had been named by Solander *Silurus pelusius*. Therefore the specific name ought to be *Macrones pelusius*". Hora & Misra (1943) use the name *Mystus halepensis* for this species, and list *Silurus pelusius* in the synonymy, but give no reason for rejecting this senior name. Both Jayaram (1954) and Sherborn (1902) accept *Silurus pelusius*, which the latter attributes to Solander in P. Russell.

The other two names for fishes that P. Russell published were both Linnaean names, namely *Silurus cois* and *Silurus anguillaris*. The latter was, however, wrongly determined and Günther made it the type of his *Clarias orontis* now recognised as a synonym of *Clarias lazera* Cuvier.

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